



# Alabama Cattlemen's Association

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## 2007 Farm Bill Forum U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns Tuskegee University

August 25, 2005  
Comments from Eric Smith, Reform, AL  
President-elect, Alabama Cattlemen's Association  
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Good afternoon Secretary Johanns and others.

My name is Eric Smith. I am a fulltime cattlemen and poultry producer from the Blackbelt region of Alabama and currently serve as president-elect of the Alabama Cattlemen's Association. The Blackbelt is a native grassland region bisected by the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. This region historically has suffered from high unemployment and a low economic base.

There have been numerous government commissions seeking ways to enhance the economic viability of our region without success. I maintain that enhancing cattle production and other areas of agriculture, like poultry, aquaculture, and other specialty crops is one of the best options for the Blackbelt.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak today and want to especially thank you for coming to Alabama. The regulations your department administers can keep me in business or put me out of business. That's why I left our family farm today to participate in this important forum.

First let me personally thank you for your support of our national beef checkoff program. This self help producer assessment program has been beneficial to our cattle industry and to me personally. We are pleased that USDA worked hard to get a favorable ruling from the US Supreme Court on our checkoff program. Other commodity programs appreciate your support as well.

Two current USDA programs have been beneficial to the cattle producer and we encourage continued funding in these areas. These programs are EQIP (Environmental Quality Initiatives Program) and WHIP (Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program) both provides the economic

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incentives that enable us to implement programs to improve the quality of our environment and enhance wildlife habitat. Government can accomplish much by providing technology and cost-share funding that allows private land owners to make those improvements to their operation that will increase productivity while protecting our natural resources.

Along with my cows, I like many of my fellow cattle producers have a poultry operation. Properly disposing of poultry litter, especially in areas of concentrated poultry production is an increasing problem. Cattle producers can benefit from spreading poultry litter on pastures. We encourage USDA to increase funding for the Poultry Litter Disposal program that is under EQIP. High fuel costs make it difficult to transport litter to farms outside of the concentrated areas.

One popular program from the past Farm Bills – and I'm sure it's still on the burner for continuation - is the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Lots of land owners in my region like the program. But, as one who is working daily to make a living off the land, CRP hurts the economy of the Blackbelt. Over 25% of the open land in the dozen Blackbelt counties is tied up in CRP. This land is out of production and sits idle. The land owners- mostly absentee – get a government check – but our struggling economy receives no benefit. No one is running cattle on this land – buying fuel, feed, seed, fertilizer, farm equipment or paying labor. I suggest you take a deeper look at the impact this program is having on rural farm economies.

Agricultural producers are the most efficient in the world, producing the safest food at the lowest percent of disposable income in history. I, along with many of our Ag producers, am concerned that as the farm bill shifts toward more environmental programs, production agriculture will be forgotten. I have a genuine concern that some in our country would be pleased if production agriculture moved to South America. This would be a serious mistake and impact the security of our nation.

Mr. Secretary, it is a real honor for me to make these comments before you and this important forum. We are pleased that during the debate on the 2007 Farm Bill, we have a Secretary, the former Governor of Nebraska, who has a working knowledge of the beef cattle industry and a strong production agriculture background. Thank you.

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